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TikTok as a Site for Ethno-Political Contestations and Conflict Mediation Among Ethiopian Diaspora

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Abstract

This study examines how TikTok has served as a site for both ethno-political contestations and conflict mediation in the context of Ethiopia by focusing on the engagement of the Ethiopian diasporic community on the platform. Informed by the deliberative democratic theoretical framework, it addresses how ethno-political contestations among the diasporic community discursively manifest themselves in the TikTok sphere and how such diasporic community mediates the contestations on the platform. In addressing these, critical discourse analysis was employed on purposively selected TikTok content created from October 2023 to September 2024 across four key thematic areas. The findings indicate that the ethno-political contestations among the diasporic community manifested themselves on the TikTok sphere by juxtaposing exclusionary ethnic identity against inclusive pan-Ethiopian identity. Such contestations were enacted through the deployment of charged rhetoric. However, the contestations were mediated by pushing back against destructive discursive trends through strategic intervention of some TikTok hosts. The platform served as a site for both an ideological battlefield and a counter-platform for challenging polemical discourses and for promoting deliberative discourse among the Ethiopian diaspora. Contrary to the prevailing skepticism about TikTok's potential for meaningful discourse, this study reveals that if deployed strategically, it can be a valuable platform for advancing rational dialogue among disparate groups, which could be instrumental in encouraging participants to seek collective solutions for enduring political problems.

Keywords

constructive engagement; deliberative democracy; diasporic community; discourse; ethnicity; ethno-political contestation; hate speech; misinformation; political polarization

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1. Introduction

Following the fall of the monarchy and the subsequent coming to power of the military government in the 1970s, Ethiopians started fleeing the country in fear of persecution and settled in Europe and North America. Since then, the number of Ethiopians in the diaspora scattered across the globe has increased, amounting to more than 3 million (Getahun, 2019). Of these, around half a million Ethiopians are currently believed to have taken up residence in the US alone.

Such rapid increase is often attributed to the intensification of the process of globalization, which has facilitated increased human mobility by decreasing communication, network, and travel costs (Lyons, 2009). Such decreased communication and travel costs have made it easier for the diaspora to form networks that link distant communities to social, political, and economic developments in the homeland. Thus, social interaction and social relations do not depend on physical co-presence anymore, as it is possible to communicate with people located elsewhere through mediated interactions. Lyons describes the situation of diasporic community driven by forced mobility in the following way:

> Those forced to leave their homeland by conflict or repression commonly have a specific set of traumatic memories and hence create specific types of "conflict-generated diaspora" that retain highly salient symbolic ties to the homeland. These diaspora are often mobilized and engaged in homeland politics in ways that shape processes of conflict and democratization. (Lyons, 2009, p. 589)

Especially in societies where authoritarian political culture is entrenched, and conflict-generating conditions are ripe, regimes often limit peaceful political mobilization and curtail free speech. Such a lack of freedom and space in the homeland often forces the diaspora to step in and fill the vacuum by providing ideas and models for action to be adopted by the homeland opposition. They connect individuals across different continents and facilitate cross-border transfer of skills and ideas to exert influence (Adamson, 2016). In doing so, diaspora networks serve as gatekeepers and shape the contours of legitimate political debates in the homeland (Lyons, 2009).

The power of the diaspora in shaping political debates in the homeland is mainly attributable to the fact that they often have greater media access and the time, resources, and freedom to articulate and circulate a political agenda than homeland actors (Lyons, 2009). The interaction between transnational connectivity and diasporic cultural reconstruction makes diasporic media central to shaping and transforming political discourses (Tsagarousianou & Retis, 2019).

However, such diaspora groups can also complicate political struggles within their homelands. Particularly, diasporic groups that are the byproducts of conflict and those that carry traumatic memories tend to frame political debates in the homeland in terms that reinforce and exacerbate the existing fault lines. Such behavior exerts pressure on the homeland political actors to be less inclined towards seeking compromise, thereby making constructive conflict resolution more difficult. In this regard, Lyons (2009) cites the Tamil, Armenian, and segments of the Ethiopian diaspora as a case in point.

Diaspora groups can also be a force in cultivating the capacity to promote peace in their homeland. In this regard, Lyons (2009) cites Irish Americans as a case in point. Based on the arguments above, Lyons (2009) is of

the conviction that conflict-generated diaspora are often key actors in homeland conflicts and may contribute either to increased polarization or new opportunities for peace.

The Ethiopian diaspora is a key player in homeland political conflicts. This is partly due to the fact that politically active members of the Ethiopian diaspora mainly tend to have been driven out of their homeland due to political and/or conflict reasons. There is also limited space for political actors in the homeland, owing to the existence of an entrenched authoritarian political culture. More importantly, the Ethiopian diaspora has a wide range of media organizations that help it wield a strong influence in shaping the political debates as well as in devising the strategies and tactics of political actors back home (Lyons, 2009).

As noted earlier, politically engaged Ethiopians in the diaspora are more known for framing the homeland political conflicts polemically, thereby making constructive conflict resolution more difficult. With such a negative role that the Ethiopian diaspora has traditionally played in the political processes in the homeland, the proliferation of digital technologies and the diaspora's structural advantage in having access to such technologies, particularly the TikTok platform, would have significant implications for the nature of its involvement in the ongoing ethno-political conflicts and their mediation in the context of Ethiopia. To this end, the article seeks to address the following research questions:

- How do ethno-political contestations discursively manifest themselves in the TikTok sphere among the Ethiopian diaspora?
- How do actors in the diasporic community mediate such contestations on the TikTok platform?

2. Social Media in Political Contestations

Social media plays a vital role in shaping political discourse. A notable instance of social media's influence came to the fore during the Arab Spring, where it was deployed to inform, mobilize, and raise awareness among the wider populace living under authoritarian regimes on issues such as human rights, corruption, and democracy (Adamu, 2020). A similar situation was observed in Ethiopia during the Oromo protest that began in 2014. In contexts like Ethiopia, where strong democratic institutions are lacking and public understanding of democracy is limited, such use of social media could also produce heightened political and ethnic tensions (Workneh, 2021). This has been evident in the growing ethnic divisions, particularly among the Oromo, Amhara, and Tigray groups. The diaspora is playing a significant role in amplifying these divisions through its skillful deployment of social media platforms, such as TikTok.

Such use of social media networks for political mobilization has intensified under Abiy's government. During the peak of the 2018 protests, for example, ethnically aligned groups like the Oromo's Qeerroo and the Amhara's Fano leveraged social media and instant messaging platforms to recruit and organize their members (Workneh, 2021). However, the opportunities created by social media platforms have also given rise to concerns, particularly in relation to the increase in outrage communication, exemplified by inflammatory language, hate speech, and political extremism. Such concerns have been corroborated by recent studies that have confirmed the role of social media in fueling tensions and violence, underscoring the need for proactive measures to mitigate these risks (Tähtinen, 2024).

In Ethiopia, this complexity is accentuated by platforms like TikTok, where users deploy it to fuel identity-centered polemical discussions. As Serrano et al. (2020) note, TikTok can both amplify hate speech

and facilitate constructive dialogue, with the platform's structure and user intentions playing key roles in shaping political discourse. According to Kaouel (2021), the algorithms of TikTok exacerbate divisions by promoting disparaging content against other ethnic groups while reinforcing in-group identities, creating a polarized feedback loop. What is more, TikTok's accessible video-sharing format allows users to share diverse content, from simple text to complex multimedia, which accelerates the spread of divisive messaging within polarized networks affiliated with ethnic groups (Ruak, 2023).

However, depending on how it is deployed, a communication technology can produce either deleterious or positive effects. Looking beyond the negative image often associated with TikTok, Karizat et al. (2021) contend that TikTok has the potential to unite individuals through responsible use and moral engagement, thereby serving as an important avenue for fostering constructive dialogue between individuals or groups, and contributing to the reduction of divisions.

This means that the TikTok platform can be harnessed to promote deliberative discourse among citizens or groups with divergent interests. Deliberative democracy is a democratic model in which the legitimacy of collective decisions rests on inclusive, reasoned, and respectful public deliberation (Williams & Knops, 2024). According to deliberative democratic theory (Fishkin & Laslett, 2003; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996), collective decision-making with inclusive participation of all relevant actors is at the core of deliberation. Such decision-making is made by means of arguments offered by and to participants who are committed to the values of rationality, impartiality, intellectual honesty, and equality among the participants. At the center of such deliberation is the idea that reasons for and against various options are to be weighed on their merits (Fishkin & Laslett, 2003). The premise is that when citizens or their representatives disagree morally, they should continue to reason together to reach mutually acceptable decisions (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). If adhered to, this has significant implications for the Ethiopian diaspora, who play an important role in homeland politics through the use of the TikTok platform.

Informed by the deliberative democratic theoretical framework, this article aims to explore the deployment of TikTok by the Ethiopian diaspora in shaping ethno-political discourse in Ethiopia and highlight, if any, openings for constructive engagement and the mitigation of conflict.

3. Methodology

3.1. Approach

This study adopted a qualitative approach and used textual analysis grounded in the tradition of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which is a multidisciplinary framework that examines the interconnections between language, power, ideology, and societal structures. As discourse is never neutral, but actively constructs social realities, CDA is instrumental for uncovering how language works as a means of power, ideology, and control.

Digital media deepens the ideological function of language by embedding power relations within apparently ordinary communication. Shifts in media narratives over time reveal how discourse modifies agency, by subtly favoring certain actors while downplaying others (Xi & Laiwang, 2026). CDA, thus, helps in making sense of how TikTok hosts formulate and mediate ethno-political contestation in the polarized political environment of Ethiopia.

CDA effectively addresses the complexities of digital communication on platforms like TikTok. Driven by algorithms, TikTok affects which discourses gain visibility or are suppressed, making CDA essential for unpacking these complexities. As Wodak (2015) notes, CDA can illuminate ethnic and political discourse, focusing on how language reinforces or challenges social inequalities—an essential dimension for consideration in this study, given the heightened ethnic tensions in Ethiopia.

In a digital environment where the viral nature of content is driven not only by user interaction but also by algorithms promoting sensational and divisive material, CDA can serve as a powerful framework for examining the dynamics of ethno-national contestations among the Ethiopian diasporic community.

3.2. Sampling

In order to identify the actors creating content on the TikTok platform, the study used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is advantageous for identifying specific characteristics within a population that align with the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). Along the same line, Patton (2014) stresses the significance of purposive sampling in qualitative research, particularly in media analysis, whereas Silverman (2020) highlights its relevance in qualitative studies involving text and video content, where explicit selection criteria are essential.

Leveraging this methodological tool, the study identified two distinct groups of TikTok content creators: the Ethiopian diaspora whose TikTok content often promotes ethnic division and hatred (e.g., Babe Bezo and Yonimagna), and the diasporic group who tend to engage in rational and inclusive discussions aimed at countering such ethnic-based divisive and polarizing discourses (e.g., Ayana and Teddy Hawassa). This latter group is composed of TikTok hosts invited to facilitate constructive political debates under the guidance of responsible moderators. TikTok hosts who regularly feature a diverse range of speakers and whose discussions on issues of public importance typically attract between 100,000 and one million views were selected for this study.

After determining pertinent content creators, the study examined 49 TikTok videos produced from October 2023 to September 2024 that exemplify both divisive discourse and rational, solution-oriented discourse. The timeframe was chosen because it marks a period when domestic politics grew sharply polarized, fueled by competing ethno-nationalist factions with strong backing from diaspora communities, intensifying the significance and volatility of video-based engagements from within the country. Moreover, the chosen period corresponds with the intensification of hostilities in the Amhara and Oromia regions following the Pretoria agreement that technically ended the Tigray conflict. The time saw the intensification of ethno-political strife and the resultant involvement of TikTok hosts as mediators in the deliberations regarding national politics.

The TikTok deliberations often took from one to two hours videos. The length of the video depends on the number of participants, who were allocated about nine minutes each to share their perspectives on the issue at hand. These videos were organized primarily by a select group of hosts who enforced rules that were meant to foster rational discussions within their communities. This targeted sampling allows for a focused investigation of problematic and constructive TikTok hosts. This approach highlights the role of politically engaged Ethiopians in the diaspora who leverage the relative freedom they enjoy living abroad to participate in homeland politics (Esberg & Siegel, 2023).

3.3. Analytic Procedure

The study fused thematic analysis with CDA to reorganize TikTok discourses. Then it dug deeper into hosts' language, intent, and context, constructing a discursive frame that positions TikTok as a center of Ethiopian politics among the target diasporic communities. Alejandro and Zhao (2024) strongly advocate for a multi-method integration, arguing that complex digital texts demand layered analytical strategies where discourse analysis captures structure and ideology while thematic analysis organizes patterns across large datasets, whereas Herzog et al. (2019) highlight that thematic analysis offers a systematic entry point for identifying recurring narratives, which can then be deepened through discourse-sensitive interpretation. Thus, this study integrated CDA with thematic analysis by mapping dominant themes in the TikTok content and made an attempt to critically unpack how these themes were discursively constructed, contested, and embedded.

The coding process was carried out by the authors, who have considerable expertise in political communication in the context of Ethiopia. The coding was based on pre-established criteria for constructive and divisive discourse developed through reflective dialogue and comparison between cases. Reflective practice not only increases consistency but also acknowledges that the analysis is situated within the qualitative framework.

4. Results and Discussion

In the context of Ethiopia, TikTok has emerged as a battleground for ethno-political contestation where partisan groups produce and disseminate narratives in support of their favored warring factions, such as Fano (an armed group claiming to defend the interests of ethnic Amharas), the Oromo Liberation Army, and the Tigray Defense Force. The Ethiopian diaspora has been at the forefront of such discursive struggle, playing out in the TikTok sphere by disseminating politically charged partisan content that often exacerbates the existing polarization in the homeland.

In response to such a state of affairs, a collective of Ethiopian speakers on TikTok in the diaspora community has come forward in support of open political dialogue that would be guided by the principles of deliberative democracy committed to the values of rationality, impartiality, intellectual honesty, and equality among the participants. They aim at strategically re-channeling TikTok as a platform for political engagement by actively working to counter the surge of ethnic hostility. They seek to challenge and neutralize the pervasive rhetoric of division by fostering a more reasoned and inclusive political discourse in the digital sphere.

This article analyzes political contestations based on both divisive narratives advanced by different actors and constructive narratives aimed at cultivating a political culture that would promote understanding among the disparate groups and thereby foster national cohesion. To this end, the TikTok content produced by user accounts in the diaspora community was systematically categorized into key thematic areas that are crucial for grasping how ethno-political contestations take shape through discourse, and for identifying the communicative strategies used to navigate, manage, or de-escalate ethnic tensions. These thematic areas include: (a) weaponizing hateful rhetoric and the use of offensive language in political discourse, (b) struggles surrounding ethnic identity and the quest for inclusive citizenship, (c) the contentious debate over the ownership of Addis Ababa city, and (d) cultural approaches to conflict resolution and their role in fostering national cohesion.

4.1. Weaponizing Hateful Rhetoric in Ethno-Political Discourse

This section examines how diasporic discussions on TikTok are increasingly driven by hateful rhetoric rather than reasoned debate when it comes to ethno-political issues. In today's Ethiopia, hate speech has become a serious political problem, especially in the discursive struggles waged among the Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups in the digital space. As the most politically significant constituencies, the two ethnic groups carry much of the burden of ethnic politics as the result of the magnitude and intensity of hateful exchanges carried out on the TikTok platform.

Since the introduction of the ethno-linguistic-based federal system in 1991, there have been tensions between the two groups over equitable distribution of power and resources. The division has deepened following the dissolution of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front-led government, and the subsequent coming to power of the Prosperity Party (PP)-led government. In such a context, the political contestations on the TikTok platform often turned into hate speech when users would provide baseless and unverified historical accounts of ethnic politics in Ethiopia. As Cinelli et al. (2021) argue, the intricate dynamics between online hate speech and misinformation are often intertwined in the digital environment. They assert that false narratives and distorted facts contribute to the polarization of opinions and the vilification of certain groups.

Among the most provocative words often used on the platform were the terms *Galla*—a pejorative term usually directed at ethnic Oromo—and *neftegna*—a term often used pejoratively to describe ethnic Amhara. The use of these terms in this work was not intended to reproduce them but to make sense of how they were deployed by the participants engaged in ethno-political discourse on the TikTok platform. The deliberate deployment of these derogatory and pejorative terms against ethnic Oromo and Amhara was usually meant to poison the discursive environment on the platform.

In order to examine the discourse more closely, the analysis of the TikTok content focused primarily on the engagement of two diaspora-based content creators, who, from their base in the US, host discussion groups under strict guidelines where violators would risk immediate expulsion. Such a rule of engagement was adopted in view of encouraging healthy political contestation on the platform. In this sub-section, the selected diaspora group's role in hosting and framing these discussions and the extent to which they navigated, amplified, or challenged ethnically charged discourses have been examined closely.

To begin with, the derogatory term that refers to ethnic Oromo was often countered by those who participated in the discussion from the Oromo diasporic community. This was done by rationalizing the term and the groundless association of the term with the Oromo community in this century. For instance, a female TikTok host posed the following rhetorical question: "What are [they] doing on TikTok?" The pronoun "they" replaced the derogatory term (*Galla*). By invoking a cultural proverb: "If a donkey kicks you and you kick back, the only difference between you and the donkey is that you walk on two feet." Her remark opens the door to multiple interpretations. It may reflect her own experiences of similar derogatory attacks from ethnic Oromo, suggesting a broader cycle of antagonism in digital space. Alternatively, it could be meant to suggest that TikTok is not a space for ethnic Oromo, implying, albeit indirectly, that the platform belongs to people like her. The underlying message could be taken as an attempt to trivialize the participation of ethnic Oromo in the online political conversations.

Despite the power of the term to instigate conflicts, some well-informed TikTok hosts tried to neutralize the use of such inflammatory words. In this regard, Ayana, for instance, said the following: "What do you gain by calling me by that term? Your words cannot diminish me; they only expose your own wounds." In this manner, Ayana shifted the discourse from one of provocation to one of defiance and rationality. The term has long been weaponized by non-Oromo to belittle ethnic Oromo and underscore the superiority of the Northern Ethiopian elites.

The TikTok hosts tried to challenge the hateful narrative not by hurling another term against their opponents but by advising the Oromo community to cast off the negative weight they attached to it. For instance, Ayana argued that the term must not be a matter to those who are educated, politically mature, and self-assured in their identity. Thus, by reframing the narrative, the TikTok hosts sought to strip the term of its historical weight, exposing it as nothing more than a linguistic construct designed for political subjugation and as one that holds no real power in the modern era.

Hateful narratives also emerge around the term *neftegna* and its politicization to stigmatize the Amhara people, as could be grasped from the following statement: "Amhara farmers did not invade others' homes with weapons, yet they are collectively branded as *neftegna*." This underscores how language is weaponized to deepen ethnic divisions. Further discourses reveal the normalization of offensive rhetoric in political debates. Users such as Yonimanga critique derogatory labels, such as *buda* (evil eyes) for Amharas from Gojjam, attempting to explain that it is just a cultural construct with no contribution to the political discourse. While countering ethnic hatred directed at Amharas, he paradoxically reuses and integrates the term into political discourse, adapting to the rhetoric of ethnic contestation, and thereby helping to minimize the negative power of the derogatory terminology, which, otherwise, could have further escalated the tension.

Some TikTok hosts from the Oromo community highlighted how ethnic Oromos were targeted on TikTok by referring to some ethnic Amhara hosts who used inflammatory remarks, as in the following: "Are you Amhara or human?" and "Are you human or *Galla*?" They pointed out how such statements would explicitly dehumanize ethnic groups and fuel toxic politics. This dynamic further underscores the deep-seated ethnic and political fault lines coming to the fore on the TikTok platform. This landscape of ideological division and ethnic-based political polarization serves as a primary driver of the provocative content proliferating on the platform.

On the other hand, there were times when TikTok hosts tried to expose the hypocrisy of some actors by making pointed remarks. For instance, Teddy Hawassa mentions the other host from the Oromo community whose comments on the Sudanese military incursions into the Ethiopian territory ostensibly align with those of the government. One of his statements reads:

> I hear your group speaking here and there, and I notice a mixing of the PP's political ideology with that of the Oromo Liberation Front….On the ground, you're [PP & OLF] like a mouse and cat, yet you appear united on social media.

The phrase "like a mouse and cat" implies deep-seated mistrust and enmity between the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) members and ethnic Oromos from the governing PP, reinforcing the existence of political polarization within ethnic Oromos, while at the same time, exposing the alleged hypocrisy of the OLF, who formally claim to oppose the government but are sometimes seen strongly supporting the same ruling PP.

In this manner, the host tried to send a message to the audience that the Oromo elites in general and the OLF members in particular are not to be trusted.

On the other hand, a speaker with an account name "Baba Bezo" makes strong allegations against those who purportedly support the Amhara National Democratic Movement and the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organizations (two of the members of the previous ruling coalition, and their reincarnations constituting the current ruling party), calling them "traitors." He asserted that these "traitors" tried to "hijack" victory from the Oromo Youth Movement (which ostensibly spearheaded the coming to power of the incumbent). In his words, "those among you who claim to have participated in the armed struggle were servants of the Amhara and Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organizations. This aligns well with the behaviour of traitors." The emphasis on betrayal raises ethnic and political tensions, thereby reinforcing divisions.

There were also sharp critiques levelled against political elites for alleged manipulation of ethnic identity for personal gains. For instance, in reference to the political elites in power, a TikTok host accused them of "dining lavishly, eating breakfast in Dubai and lunch in New York." The argument is that although these elites used the ethnic card to come to power, they led lives that were far detached from the lives of their constituent members, questioning the validity of holding power through ethnic representation.

The TikTok hosts who have regularly gathered users on the platform often engaged in a sharp critique of rebel groups involved in the conflict. In rebuking the behavior of the supporters of the armed groups, for instance, a TikTok host said the following: "The Fano group is using extreme measures and violence to push their agenda." Likewise, he criticized the TikTok influencers who are sympathetic to the Oromo Liberation Army. He argued that in rendering support to their respective armed groups on their platforms, social media influencers were contributing to the poisoning of the debate and the deepening of divisive political discourse and societal polarization.

Irreechaa, the annual Oromo thanksgiving ritual, has become another point of contention fueling hate speech. The festival, rather than being embraced as a cultural practice, is frequently weaponized to undermine Oromo identity. As one speaker asserts: "If we lack a culture of tolerance, if we degrade one another's traditions and harbour hatred toward each other, then Ethiopia, as a united entity, ceases to exist." This statement directly challenges those who advocate for national unity while denigrating Irreechaa, a cultural practice cherished by the Oromo people. It underscores the critical need for mutual respect, warning that the erosion of respect for cultural diversity threatens the very fabric of Ethiopia's unity.

However, another discussant in the same video introduces a contrasting perspective as follows: "I see this issue from two perspectives….As a Muslim, I worship only Allah…my religion forbids me from participation in Irreechaa, which is associated with Waaqeffannaa." For ethnic Oromo, on the other hand, Waaqeffannaa is the indigenous religion of the Oromo people, centered on the worship of Waaqaa—the supreme creator of the universe, which I respect. By framing Irreechaa as an exclusive religious domain of Waaqeffannaa, the statement positions the festival as inherently incompatible with other religious beliefs, deepening the exclusionary ideology and turning a cultural ritual into a battleground for identity politics.

On the other hand, some cautious TikTok hosts describe Irreechaa as denoting a religious practice of ethnic Oromos, and, thus, accord it cultural legitimacy. Such a perspective characterizes the practice as follows: "They

go to the riverbanks to plead for Waaqaa Gurraachaa, praying as they circle the river, tapping the water with green grass." From an Orthodox Christian perspective, however, Irreechaa denotes darkness: "There is no connection between darkness and light, nor between demons and Jesus Christ." By associating Irreechaa with darkness and falsehood, such a perspective not only delegitimizes Irreechaa as a religious practice but also positions it as its nemesis. These instances indicate how TikTok actors use the platform for both fueling ethnic division and hostility, and promoting rational discourse with the view to mediating ethnic conflicts.

4.2. Ethnic Identity Struggles and the Quest for Inclusive Citizenship

This theme explores how diaspora TikTok speakers frame the contestation between advocates of ethnic-based federalism and proponents of citizenship-based federalism. The discussions on TikTok capture political tensions tied to ethnicity and citizenship, reflecting the agendas of various political factions. On one hand, there are proponents of a pan-Ethiopian and citizenship-based identity; on the other hand, there are those who advocate for the pre-eminence of ethnic-based identity. At the forefront of advocacy for ethnic-based identity are the Oromo. On the other hand, there are the Fano and their supporters who root for a pan-Ethiopian identity, save for the fact that Fano itself hails from the Amhara ethnic group. The contestation on platforms like TikTok, thus, becomes a struggle between those advocating for ethnic-based identity politics and a decentralized federal structure, and those seeking a unified democratic Ethiopia.

Oromo activists believe that the current Ethiopian constitution has progressive frameworks aimed at promoting ethnic self-determination and regional autonomy. However, they argue that its effective implementation is thwarted by political, administrative, and societal challenges. By rectifying such challenges, they believe that tensions can be eased and peaceful coexistence can be ensured on the basis of democratic equality.

Challenging the validity of identity-based politics, Ayana voiced the following: "We share a common citizenship, and together, we can overcome anything." Although Ayana is an ethnic Oromo, he does not champion ethnic nationalism, nor does he root for a supra-national identity. Instead, he positioned himself in the middle, sounding a balanced voice. He calls for a shift towards embracing peaceful politics, noting that "Amhara people must embrace dialogue-based politics," adding, "violence and division do not reflect Amhara values, Ethiopian culture, or spiritual traditions."

In view of talking sense to those who keep on disparaging one another, some speakers on TikTok posed the following rhetorical question: "How can we insult each other based on colour or facial features?" In emphasizing the need for engagement, a speaker from the Oromo community noted: "PP and Fano have killed my family members, but I can still engage with their supporters because I want to find solutions to prevent future deaths." Despite the fact that he had suffered personal losses, he believes that only engagement can avert similar future disasters, stressing that TikTok discussions should focus on finding durable solutions.

Warning against the conception of ethnic identity and Ethiopian identity as irreconcilable, a speaker on TikTok noted: "We must recognize that being [Ethnic Group Y] and Ethiopian are not mutually exclusive," adding that "if someone says he is from the Amhara ethnic group, he is entitled to that identity, and we should respect it," for one does not need to disown his ethnic identity in order to be considered a true Ethiopian. He can cherish

his ethnic roots while being proud of being an Ethiopian. While it is legitimate to seek the acknowledgment of grievances of the past, he warns against the obsession with historical narratives of ethnic dominance; he, then, called for a focus on the collective future.

In view of the need for embracing inclusive citizenship and strengthening unity, some TikTok hosts reminded the discussants to focus on citizenship. For instance, Teddy Hawassa, one of the hosts, notes the following: "We are all citizens of this country; ethnicity should not divide us," implicitly framing ethnicity as divisive. By noting how "Amhara identity starts and ends with Amhara," some of the speakers stressed how such an ethnocentric political perspective could complicate the concept of inclusive citizenship. Some discussants also challenged ethnic-based political loyalty by wondering why citizens should support leaders solely on the basis of ethnic affiliations. Instead, they stressed the need for transcending ethnicity, without which addressing broader societal issues would be difficult.

What is more, some speakers noted how naïve it would be to assume that ethnic loyalty would bring about the improvement of one's life chances. For instance, a discussant noted the following: "Why should it matter to me if you are from my ethnic group or not?" and "How will your personal gains and privileges bring comfort to my life just because we share the same ethnic identity?" indicating the futility of blind ethnic loyalty.

At the level of self-identification, however, there was a strong argument that it should be left to individuals to decide. "Who am I to define someone else's ethnicity?" and "Self-determination is a fundamental right that must be respected." As autonomous agents, individuals should be free to self-identify, and sub-national identity should not be ostracized in the name of national unity, for the two should not be seen as mutually exclusive. The discussions indicate the tension between the need for ethnic belonging and the liberal notion of all-encompassing citizenship.

As this tension heated up, some discussants felt the need to rein in a few outliers to protect the discussion from veering off track. In this regard, one participant said that "hosting such individuals leads to a competition of verbal abuse," and pointed out the challenge of striking a balance between free speech and maintaining respectful, inclusive political conversations. Then, Ayana, the platform host, stepped in and tried to de-escalate the contentious debate by asking, "Why don't we try to address each other's problems?" and "Instead of fighting, why not sit down and talk?" signaling the need for mutual respect, understanding, and reconciliation in place of fueling ethnic hostility in moving forward.

The second host—Teddy Hawassa—intervened and said the following: "Everyone has the right to express their political beliefs, but we must respect each other," highlighting the importance of respect for diverse viewpoints. Such strategic interventions by the platform hosts shifted the tone of the discussion in favor of focusing on unifying issues and being sympathetic to the pains of others. In this regard, a participant noted: "We must unite; not allow ourselves to be divided over historical issues."

Some speakers argued that fragmented and chaotic armed conflicts waged along ethnic cleavages would not bring about the desired outcome. Instead, such conflicts would eventually ensure mutual self-destruction. Hence, they called for engaging in constructive dialogue with various ethnic groups with a view to channeling collective efforts to end human suffering. It is only in doing so that lasting peace and national cohesion could be achieved.

4.3. The Contentious Debate Over the Ownership of Addis Ababa

This section examines how TikTok speakers debate the contested ownership of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia's political discourse. Addis Ababa—Ethiopia's capital—was established in 1886 by Emperor Menelik II, who sought to create a new capital to unify and modernize Ethiopia in the face of the impending threat of European colonization. Acknowledging the site's strategic and symbolic significance, Emperor Menelik selected a location in the central highlands that provided both defensive advantages and a temperate climate. The name "Addis Ababa," which means "New Flower," embodies Menelik's vision of growth and progress. Today, Addis Ababa serves as a testament to the nation's rich heritage and its crucial role in shaping African history.

On the other hand, the Oromo people believe that Addis Ababa was historically their sacred land, where they had long practiced agriculture. They prefer to call the city "Finfinnee," although this name fails to garner wider acceptance among the broader Ethiopian populace. Those who refer to the capital as "Finfinnee" claim that the capital belongs to the Oromo. Scholars (Levy, 2000) often stress the inseparability of ethnic nationalism and the ownership of land. According to Levy (2000), the political movements of ethnic groups and/or indigenous peoples are about land more than any other issue—about the right to prevent or at least benefit from development on their traditional lands, about the restoration of lands from which they have been dispossessed, and about securing against future losses. And the controversies over the ownership of Addis Ababa city should be seen in this light.

Today, the debate between the Oromo and other ethnic groups, particularly the Amharas, over the ownership of Addis Ababa remains a sensitive and unresolved issue, as both groups claim historical ownership of the city. Such rivalry over the ownership of the city has often fueled ethnic conflict, and the TikTok platform has become a convenient site for reflecting and amplifying the contestation, which sometimes exacerbates tensions in the city.

The TikTok platform is rife with derogatory terms intended to shape discussions around the ownership of Addis Ababa. For instance, the debate over the *neftegnas*' claim (a coded language used to refer to ethnic Amharas) over the city's historical ownership is viewed by some Oromo activists as the desire of the Amharas for a continued usurpation of Oromos' land. Amidst this, certain speakers contended that neither Addis Ababa nor Arat Kilo (the seat of the government) should be recognized as a legitimate territory of ethnic Oromos. To this end, they insisted that "The 'x' [a pejorative word used to refer to ethnic Oromos] must leave Arat Kilo." In response, an Oromo host cautioned the participants against using inflammatory language that could aggravate intergroup conflict.

In the midst of this contestation, Sona Takele—a young ethnic Oromo artist—released a song about Addis Ababa, and it went viral on the TikTok platform. The song opens with the line, "*Bole Yaa Bole, Xiqqoo xabannumooree yaa ijoollee*," meaning, "Bole my Bole, shall we play once more, you my friends." The song portrays Bole—a central area in Addis Ababa—as a playground for young Oromos, sparking heated discussions among speakers on TikTok over its political implications.

In an apparent reference to ethnic Amharas as recent settlers, a line in the song states, "Others arrived here yesterday." Supporters of the Amharas and other ethnic groups challenged the political agenda lurking behind

the song. In this sense, TikTok serves as an arena where artistic products like political songs are circulated, interpreted, articulated, and reshaped by groups to advance their political agenda. Especially in places like Ethiopia, where political space is highly constrained, TikTok has become pivotal for the circulation of popular songs with politically loaded lyrics.

According to Schrott (2025), TikTok's integration of popular music and sound bites enhances emotional quality, making political messages more engaging and shareable. This user-driven environment encourages remixing and interaction, cultivating community and collective agency in activism. Furthermore, Sadler (2022) highlights how TikTok rapidly spreads protest songs that users can adapt to various political movements, fostering solidarity and mobilization among activists

Following the release of the song, expressions related to the song or inspired by its popularity sprang up on TikTok. These statements revolved around both exclusionary and integrative discourses. Statements exemplifying exclusionary discourse read like the following: "The city belongs to its indigenous people; newcomers must acknowledge this"; Addis Ababa "belongs solely to one ethnic group [to ethnic Oromos]"; "Addis Ababa is the navel of the Oromo people….Can you separate our navel?"; "We must assert that Addis belongs to the Amhara, not to all of Ethiopia." On the other hand, statements reflecting an integrative discourse read like the following: "Addis Ababa has always been a melting pot, and no single group can claim sole ownership"; "Addis Ababa is the capital city of both Ethiopia and Oromia."

The exclusionary discourse was advanced mainly by some ethnic Oromo and ethnic Amhara discussants. However, aided by the redirecting efforts of the hosts, the integrative discourse was articulated by discussants by stressing a long-cherished history of the city as the nation's cosmopolitan city where citizens of diverse ethnicities hailing from the four corners of the country have lived together and contributed to its development.

Overall, in spite of the fact that contestations over the ownership of the city still continue, the debates on the TikTok platform were instrumental in reducing emotionally charged discourse in favor of rationalizing one's arguments and respecting the viewpoints of others, which gives hope for the possibility of marshalling a collective effort in seeking a common ground in the resolution of the dispute down the road.

4.4. Adoption of Cultural Approaches to Conflict Resolution

This final section briefly explores how TikTok discussions address traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, with content creators from diverse ethnic backgrounds collaborating in video production. It also considers the role of TikTok in combating ethnic-based hatred and fostering dialogue to mitigate conflicts. It is often noted that cultural diversity significantly influences conflict resolution strategies and that many societies prioritize nonviolent alternatives to violence.

Many of the videos analyzed highlight the cultural role in resolving conflicts. According to Ayana, for example, insults often stem from personal struggles, noting that "hurt people hurt others." He advocates for taking a psychological approach to de-escalation with a focus on empathy and societal sincerity. Another host calls for peaceful solutions, appealing to religious teachings: "The Bible teaches that those who bring reconciliation are blessed." Furthermore, a speaker emphasized accountability, stating that "we agreed that it's possible to

criticize political parties or individuals, but it's unacceptable to insult entire nations or ethnicities," underscoring the cultural value of mutual respect. Emphasizing the pivotal role that culture plays in conflict resolution, Avruch (2022) argued that understanding cultural contexts is essential for effectively addressing disputes.

Certain TikTok discussants emphasized the need for a genuine expression of remorse and embracing reconciliation as essential in addressing past grievances. For instance, one speaker noted: "As humans, we should apologize when we do wrong," and highlighted that "our elders used to resolve conflicts through dialogue, not violence. We must return to that practice." Stressing the importance of peace, another TikToker added: "We must find ways to end conflict. Change cannot be achieved through war; that is why we say, 'No to war.'" Another discussant said: "Our cultural values teach us to forgive and coexist," and "The killing must stop…if we can't unite around this, what can we ever agree on?"

Moreover, Ayana emphasized the need for holding those who engage in inciting ethnic conflict accountable, and called for the end of the suffering of fellow citizens in the following words: "The killing of mothers must stop. Man-made hunger must stop." He urged his fellow TikTokers to "foster harmony and trust." Capitalizing on Ayana's appeals, another host noted the following: "Let's learn from the past, embrace the mindset of the 21st century, and build a shared history," thereby promoting reconciliation and collective identity-building. In noting the pitfalls of overlooking the necessity of a culturally informed approach in conflict resolution, Avruch (2022) stressed how neglecting cultural dimensions can lead to misunderstandings and exacerbate tensions.

Despite the contentious nature of the conversation in the TikTok videos analyzed, many participants advocated for the resolution of the conflict through dialogue. In this regard, some hosts highlighted how the Gurage community has historically exercised culturally embedded reconciliation methods to effectively mediate ethnic conflicts and restore peace, and, hence, called for harnessing such timeless cultural assets in addressing ethnic tensions and preventing violence.

While advocating for forging national unity through reconciliation, various participants also called for an end to the political exploitation of ethnic divisions. To this end, they urged citizens to remind themselves of the need to unite around shared values and develop a sense of respect and tolerance for difference.

5. Conclusion

The study set out to examine how TikTok has served as a site for both ethno-political contestations and conflict mediation in the context of Ethiopia by focusing on the engagement of the Ethiopian diasporic community on the platform. Informed by the deliberative democratic theoretical framework, the study attempted to address how ethno-political contestations among the diasporic community discursively manifest themselves in the TikTok sphere and how such a diasporic community mediates the contestations on the platform. To this end, four key thematic areas considered to serve as structured frameworks for understanding the platform's role in shaping ethnic politics among the Ethiopian diasporic community were identified and analyzed.

The findings indicate that the ethno-political contestations among the diasporic community manifest themselves on the TikTok sphere by juxtaposing exclusionary ethnic identity against inclusive pan-Ethiopian or citizen-based identity. As ethnic nationalism is often inseparable from the claim to ancestral land, the

political contestations over land ownership were framed in exclusionary ethnic ownership rights versus common citizens' ownership rights.

Such contestations were often enacted through the deployment of charged rhetoric as both a political instrument and a tool of personal attacks against perceived ethnic "others." In such a heated discursive environment, the narratives employed by participants were often used to dehumanize opposing groups, thereby normalizing political violence against perceived "others" as a justifiable course of action. Such hate speech and dehumanization often fed on the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

On the other hand, some actors on the platform mediated the contestations by pushing back against polemical and destructive discourses employed by some participants. This was done through the strategic intervention of some TikTok hosts by not only urging participants to adhere to the platform's code of engagement but also by carefully redirecting and reframing contentious issues in a manner that could facilitate the conduct of rational and open debate that entertains diverse viewpoints.

When necessary, the hosts stepped in and debunked unsubstantiated claims made by some partisan participants and set the record straight. They also tried to provide context for contested issues in view of enlightening the participants on the issues. Through such strategies, they attempted to temper and tame the visceral reactions and thereby steer the platform towards constructive engagement that focused on seeking collective solutions to the enduring ethno-political problems. In this regard, it could be said that the TikTok platform served as both an ideological battlefield and a counter-platform for challenging polemical discourses and for promoting deliberative discourse among the Ethiopian diaspora.

In sum, many often dismiss TikTok as an unviable platform for constructive engagement. However, contrary to the prevailing skepticism about its potential for meaningful discourse, this study reveals that if used strategically, it can be a valuable platform for advancing rational dialogue among disparate groups, which could be instrumental in encouraging participants to seek collective solutions for enduring political problems.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available and can be obtained upon valid request.

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